His interest in handwritten and printed books went beyond their function as the sole sources of the historian. . . . He had a unique sort of emotional relationship with books, where the distinctions between function and essence, between the vessel and its contents, became blurred.

Malachi Beit-Arié, “Gershom Scholem as Bibliophile”  

“The books’ fate was no better than that of the people,” said Scholem.

Barbara Honigmann, “Double Burial” 2

The Diaspora Treasures Committee

At the end of World War II, after Europe was liberated by the Allies, enormous collections of property were discovered in the conquered countries—mainly libraries and smaller collections of books that had been plundered by the Nazis. Before the war these books had belonged to communities that were persecuted under the Nazi regime such as the Freemasons, but mainly what was found was books that had belonged to Jews, along with ritual objects and other Jewish cultural treasures.

The source of most of the stolen books was the Jewish communities of Germany, and about a third of those communities had been transferred to Germany from the countries conquered by the Nazis. The work of stealing and keeping this property was done by so-called research institutes, which were established by the Nazis and carried out pseudo research about Judaism and the Jewish question. The central institutes were the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA, Reich Main Security Office) and the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg (ERR, Reichsleiter Rosenberg Taskforce). In the American occupation zone many collections of books were found, and these were taken by the US Army to a central collection point that was established in July 1945 in the Rothschild Library in
Frankfurt. After that became too small to contain all the books, they were transferred to Offenbach, a city on the other side of the Main River, where they were kept at the Offenbach Archival Depot (OAD). This was a five-story building at Mainstrasse 169 that had belonged to the I. G. Farben company and had been converted into a storehouse. The OAD was opened on March 2, 1946 under the command of Captain Seymour Pomrenze—an American Jew who, before being conscripted in the army, had been an archivist at the US National Archives—and it became the center for the collection and identification of stolen books, with the aim of returning them to their owners.4

The process of returning the property would have been relatively simple, had it been possible to identify and locate the legal owners of the books or their heirs, but what was to become of books that had been Jewish communal property, or whose owners could not be identified or had been killed? Who was the legal heir to this property? Within contemporary Jewish centers these questions became critical, and they became an urgent matter for the great powers that ruled Europe and the non-Jewish world because the status of the Jewish people was not anchored in international law, and thus it was impossible for them to demand compensation collectively. Beyond that, according to accepted judicial views, property with no living owners or their heirs that had been taken as plunder in war either belonged to the country within whose borders it was found or to the occupying power, or it had to be returned to the country where it had originally belonged.5 Hence, there was reason to fear that this property might remain in Germany or that it would be transferred to the United States or to the countries in Europe where Jewish life no longer existed, and whose governments had collaborated with the Nazis. At the same time this situation led to confusion within the Jewish collective. Indeed, the question of the fate of these books was bound up with many questions in that collective, which gained intensity after the war: Who was the true representative of the Jewish people, to whom the treasures of Jewish culture and spirit belonged? Where was the center of Jewish life, from which continuity would emerge after the great catastrophe?

Even before the end of the war, when the imminent defeat of the Germans was anticipated and the dimensions of the destruction of European Jewry were already known in the West, the world’s Jewish centers began trying to determine the future of Jewish cultural treasures that had been stolen and remained in Europe with no heirs to claim them. The problem was first discussed in England, in a lecture given by the historian Cecil Roth in April 1943 at a conference of the Jewish Historical Society of England, which was published a year later.6 Roth proposed transferring the books without owners to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where they could be preserved, and in his conclusion he recommended

96 DESPAIR (1939–1948)
the establishment of a committee that could continue dealing with the subject. Such a committee was formed, and its functions were to remain in contact with the Allied authorities regarding stolen property and to take care of other matters connected with the restoration of Jewish cultural life in Europe. The members of this committee included Roth and the jurist Norman Bentwich. Similarly in the summer of 1944, the Commission on European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction (CEJCR) was established in the United States, headed by the historian Salo Baron. The purpose of this commission was to rehabilitate and rebuild the Jewish communities in Europe and elsewhere in the world by, among other things, restoring stolen cultural treasures to the Jewish people and distributing those treasures among various Jewish communities. The commission was organized and administered by Jewish American academics and intellectuals such as the philosopher Hannah Arendt, the historian Joshua Starr, and the jurist Jerome Michael. In 1946 the commission published an initial list of Jewish cultural treasures that had existed in Europe before the Nazi period as a first step toward obtaining information about their location. In the United States there was interest in the books that were found in the American occupation zone in Germany, particularly the Jewish books, and as a result a delegation of librarians from the Library of Congress was formed and sent to Germany for the purpose of enriching the collections of that library and those various others in the United States by acquiring books from the American occupation zone.

People at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem began to lay the groundwork for possible action that would lead to the transfer of the books’ ownership to the Jewish people. The approach of the university was that the worthiest destination for the books was the National and University Library in Jerusalem, because the communities and institutions to which the books had belonged no longer existed, their restoration was unclear and would be prolonged, and at the Hebrew University “the attempt is being made, and with considerable success, to create a Central Library for the Jewish People, and in Jerusalem there are gathered a larger number of distinguished Jewish scholars than in any other place, for whom these libraries could be of great use in their work of research.” On May 6, 1944, two days after the letter quoted above was written, the Diaspora Treasures Committee (Hava‘adah Lehatzalat Otzrot Hagolah) met in Jerusalem to discuss actions that could be taken to recover the stolen books. According to the minutes of the meeting—in which senior people from the Hebrew University, including Scholem, took part—the members were in agreement that the Hebrew University should promptly send an official emissary to Europe who would be in contact with Jewish organizations in England and the United States and represent the interests of the university. “It is important,” stated Martin Buber, “for us to
appear in the list of claimants as soon as possible.” Scholem emphasized the danger that Jewish organizations in England and the United States might demand the books for themselves. “The university must appear as the custodian of the deposit,” he argued. “A delegation must be formed to go to Munich and Frankfurt. Treasuries of stolen books are located in those two places. If an agent of the university does not appear soon, they will decide without us. We must address England and America.”

On January 4, 1946, an article by Robert Weltsch appeared in Haaretz, in which he reported on his impressions after a stay in Frankfurt. Weltsch wrote about a visit to the collection point in the Rothschild Library and his meeting with Koppel Pinson, the director of the education department of the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)—the central American Jewish relief organization—in Germany. Although most of the books had already been transferred to the OAD, although it was not yet open, the visit to the Rothschild Library was enough to convince Weltsch that this was “the largest Jewish library in the world.” The books were not arranged in any order, so it was difficult for Weltsch to estimate the importance of the various items. “Most of the books that I opened have no value for libraries,” he admitted, “but it is always impossible to know whether a highly valuable Hebrew book is lying next to a trashy Yiddish romance.” Nevertheless, he estimated that “the main treasures are still lying in Offenbach, and no one knows whether more cartons, which had been hidden somewhere, will be discovered.” He called for action on the part of the Jewish center in the Land of Israel, both internally and internationally:

Here the Land of Israel must receive the role it deserves: it is sad that very little of what was possible has been done about this as yet. World public opinion must be informed that the Land of Israel is the spiritual center of the Jewish people, and it is appropriate that the treasures of culture, which were stolen from the Jews of Europe, should be brought there, for no one can claim them now. . . . Care must be taken to send experts to Germany to work on the material. This is our right. The National Library in Jerusalem must demand it for itself. It must send a group of chosen officials to Frankfurt to examine the books, appraise them, arrange them, and catalogue them. It is absurd that until now this task has been assigned to Aryan German officials, who have no knowledge of Jewish literature. It seems to me that I was the first person with a scientific interest in the matter to enter this library. . . . This entire vast collection was abandoned until now, and no one paid attention to it. It is necessary to try immediately to obtain permission from the American military administration, which usually responds to such matters with great understanding, to send Jewish experts from Jerusalem.
Weltsch’s call from Frankfurt did not fall on deaf ears in Jerusalem. Two days after his article was published, the administrator of the Hebrew University, David Werner Senator, sent a letter to the rector, Michael Fekete, along with the clipping from the newspaper. Senator felt that the time had come to do something about the books and put the university in contact with the American authorities in Germany. Weltsch’s suggestion to send experts and librarians to Germany to sort out the material there seemed extremely sensible to Senator, and he felt that doing so would definitely assist the university achieve its long-range goals. He wrote Fekete: “You know that there is a weekly airplane from Palestine to the American zone. I would therefore suggest that the committee dealing with the matter should have a meeting as soon as possible and should elaborate definite and concrete proposals in the direction outlined above.” Indeed, the pace of work was accelerated. The Diaspora Treasures Committee met twice in January 1946 to discuss ways of increasing the efforts to send representatives to Europe as soon as possible. At the second meeting, which was held on January 24, three significant decisions were made.

The first decision was to establish a subcommittee to discuss relations between the committee with other institutions in the world, both Jewish and non-Jewish. This subcommittee, whose members were Shmuel Hugo Bergmann, Gotthold Weil, and Scholem, met once, on January 31. It recommended the establishment of a small international commission headed by a representative of the Hebrew University, which would speak for the Jewish people to the Americans and demand a decision regarding the distribution of stolen Jewish property. The subcommittee also determined criteria for future distribution, according to which priority would be given to Jewish institutions in England, which had suffered from German bombing, and equal division between the United States and Palestine. The division would be determined by two adjudicators—one from Palestine and the other from the United States.

The second decision adopted at the meeting on January 24 was to create a legal committee alongside the Diaspora Treasures Committee, whose task would be to investigate the legal problems involved with the recovery. Three senior jurists from the Hebrew University were appointed to the legal committee: Norman Bentwich, Nathan Feinberg, and Abraham Haim Freimann. Its first meeting was held on January 29, and on February 26 it issued a nine-page memorandum examining the legal aspects of the stolen Jewish property. This memorandum laid down the guidelines for future actions of the Diaspora Treasures Committee. After a short survey of the present situation of stolen Jewish cultural treasures in Europe, the memorandum discussed the question of the ownership of this property. The main problem that emerged in the report was the legal principle,
accepted in most countries, that “the private property of missing individuals, who left no legal heirs passes by inheritance to the state treasury.”

However, in the case under discussion, it was not possible to recognize Germany’s legal right of inheritance, because estates in its territory had been left without heirs as a result of the systematic murder of Jews. The legal committee argued:

In light of what is known about the systematic campaign of destruction carried out by the German state against the Jewish people, it would only be just and correct according to elementary human decency that the abandoned estates of the Jews who were murdered without leaving any heirs would pass, instead of to the treasury of the state of Germany, into the hands of the Jewish people, the creator of this cultural property. The Jewish people, which is coming to life again in the land of the Patriarchs, has a unique and vital spiritual connection to the treasures of its culture, [and a duty] to honor and keep them in its national and spiritual center in the Land of Israel.

The transfer of this property to Palestine also was in keeping with the principles of the laws of inheritance, which seek to honor as much as possible the wishes and intentions of the person leaving the property. In the opinion of the legal committee, the victims certainly would have wished to make the property available to the “Jewish community which is involved in Jewish culture and literature.” Since the Hebrew University in Jerusalem was the only Jewish university in the world, and since its library was the national library of the Jewish people, available to all Jews, “therefore there is no place or institution in the Jewish world that has a better right, from the cultural, moral, and human points of view, to be appointed as the trustee for the cultural estate of the destroyed Jewish Diaspora than the National and University Library on Mount Scopus in Jerusalem.”

The Hebrew University and the National Library were willing to receive this property, to ensure its protection, and to serve jointly as the trustee of it for two years, after which all items still lacking other owners would be owned by the National and University Library in Jerusalem, which would be responsible for distributing surplus books among Jewish communities around the world. With regard to cooperation with other Jewish institutions, the committee recommended forming a united front with them and having the Hebrew University appear as the sole claimant. For this purpose, agreement had to be reached with various cultural institutions in the United States, England, and Europe on the distribution of the books in accordance with the specific requirements of the Jewish communities in each country. The final item in the memorandum addressed the possibility of making another claim against the state of Germany for “certain compensations
from the cultural treasures of public libraries in Germany.” The purpose of such a claim would be to have transferred to the Jewish people Hebrew and Jewish manuscripts, publications, and archives connected with Judaism, as well as a certain number of general and scholarly books. There were three reasons for making this claim: first, their behavior toward the Jewish people proved that the Germans are not fit to preserve the treasures of Jewish spirit and culture; second, “an irreparable loss has been caused to the Jewish people and its culture, and the German people owes the Jewish people payment for damages for this wicked destruction”;29 and third, that German cultural institutions had received many contributions from Jewish philanthropists and, given the mass murder of German Jews, the Jewish people was entitled to be compensated for those contributions.

The general guidelines laid down by the memorandum directed the future efforts of the Hebrew University to claim ownership of stolen Jewish property that had no other owner. However, this demand for sole trusteeship was softened later on, given the urgency of removing the books from Germany. As will be discussed below in this chapter, this urgency reduced the competition among the various Jewish centers around the world and ultimately helped them form a united front.

The third decision made at the meeting on January 24 may have been the most significant one: the choice of the members of the delegation that would leave for Europe to rescue the treasures of the Diaspora and take the first steps in implementing the basic principles laid out in the memorandum. Avraham Yaari, the librarian of the National Library, and Scholem were chosen for this mission.30

The Story of a Journey: January–August 1946

Preparations in Jerusalem (January 28–April 10)

After receiving news of his appointment to the delegation, Scholem began preparations for the trip. On January 28 the Hebrew University officially requested a visa to Germany for the two delegates through the American consul in Jerusalem, but this request was rejected in early March.31 The refusal did not discourage Scholem. A letter to Senator dated February 21 shows that Scholem was planning for an imminent departure. He asked Senator to obtain visas for him to Czechoslovakia, Italy, Holland, France, England, Poland, and Switzerland. Moreover, after his trip to Europe he planned to continue directly to the United States for the purpose of giving a series of lectures there.

During the preparations, disagreements arose between Scholem and Yaari regarding the division of responsibility and authority during the mission. While Yaari insisted that the members of the delegation must have equal authority in making decisions, Scholem argued that one of them had to have the final say in
case disagreements between them could not be resolved, and since he was the senior member of the delegation, this right should be accorded to him. Yaari sensed that Scholem was not including him in the preparations for the trip, and he appealed to Judah Leib Magnes. Magnes asked Scholem to cooperate with Yaari as much as possible on a basis of equality, though he agreed with Scholem that if the need arose, the final decision should be his. In response Scholem asked to meet with Fekete, Magnes, and Yaari to remove any shadow of doubt regarding the division of authority during the trip, concluding his letter in a personal tone that indicates the tension between him and Yaari that existed even before the trip: “I am certainly prepared to work with Mr. Yaari [Scholem crossed out the words “with Mr. Yaari”], on the basis you wrote of, but I cannot help but see his attitude to personal questions with great concern. His behavior forces me, uncharacteristically, to adopt great caution in my relations with him, and I regret this.” The issue was resolved at a meeting between Fekete, Senator, and Scholem, based on the compromise suggested by Magnes, and it was formulated in a letter sent by Fekete to Yaari and Scholem. The letter emphasizes the equality between the two members of the delegation in terms of responsibility for the mission, but “in a case when it is impossible for them to reach a decision, it will be the right of the senior member of the delegation, Professor Scholem.” At the end of March, the Hebrew University sent an official letter of appointment to its delegates, which set out their functions and the nature of their task:

A. You have two principal functions:

1. You must seek to gather all information that you can obtain about Jewish collections, libraries, archives, and other accumulations, etc. that are in the hands of the Germans and to seek as much as possible to examine the collections themselves to the best of your ability.

2. You are to be in contact with local Jewish institutions, communities, or other organizations, which can be regarded as important to clarify the fate of past and future collections and clarify all the questions involved in the matter with them, and you should try to discover the fate of the owners of personal collections, to the degree they are present in the countries where you will visit.

The letter of appointment emphasized the informative nature of the mission: the task of Scholem and Yaari was to gain as much information as possible about the books, but not to begin any judicial or official negotiations. Furthermore, it specified the need for close cooperation with delegates of the Jewish Agency and the JDC who were active in Europe. It continued: “In case of need, you have the power of attorney to present yourself as emissaries of the Jewish Agency in any matter touching upon this mission.”
Making connections and depending on international Jewish organizations, especially the JDC, were necessary for success, because the JDC had access to the American occupation zone, and its leaders were closely connected to occupation authorities. Magnes wrote to Joseph Schwartz, the manager of the JDC in Europe, who was based in Paris, asking the JDC to assist the representatives of the Hebrew University as much as would be necessary for them to carry out their mission. In reply, Schwartz’s assistant, Arthur Greenleigh, wrote Magnes that the JDC would help as much as it could, but—in a hint of what was to come—Greenleigh emphasized that traveling from Paris to Germany was no simple matter at that time, because decent accommodations and meals were scarce. On April 10, the two delegates of the Hebrew University set out with letters of recommendation and information they had collected in advance, but without permission to enter Germany.

London and Paris (April 10–May 15)

Scholem and Yaari arrived in Paris on April 14 on a flight from London, where they had stayed for two days. Scholem took advantage of that stay to visit the family of his brother Werner, who had been murdered in Buchenwald six years earlier, and to meet with representatives of the JDC and Bentwich, who were in England. Bentwich tried to help Scholem and Yaari and connect them with the JDC in Paris. In a letter to Magnes, sent after Scholem and Yaari had left, Bentwich reported on their visit and on the tension among various Jewish organizations regarding ownership of the stolen books. Roth had expressed to Bentwich his dissatisfaction about the conduct of the Hebrew University regarding the books. Roth supported the establishment of a common organization representing the Jews of England, the United States, and Palestine to recover the books and distribute them fairly, and he had protested the idea of appointing the Hebrew University as the trustee responsible for distribution. At the same time, Bentwich foresaw that the Americans would be the greatest obstacle to the university’s achieving its goals. According to a document that had come into Bentwich’s possession, Pinson had tried to arrange the transfer of the book collections to the United States in trusteeship of American institutions. Bentwich wrote: “As he is the person to whom S[cholem] and Y[aari] turn, I expect he will not be very helpful.”

After the end of World War II, Paris was full of displaced people and others returning home. Prisoners of war, exiled forced laborers, and political exiles created an entirely new society in the city with their return. Great optimism prevailed, but at the same time that society was bruised and fragmented. The Jews of Paris, who had hoped to return to their homes and find there the property that
had belonged to them before the war, often discovered that their property had been stolen and that its recovery was not a simple matter. Disappointment with the situation and with the indifference of the non-Jewish residents of Paris, as well as physical deprivation, created a grim atmosphere among the Jews of the city. But in 1946 the leadership of the Jewish institutions in the city had already been restored, and the JDC was working intensively, becoming a central factor in shaping the renewed life of the Jews of France.

Immediately after their arrival in Paris, Scholem and Yaari contacted the office of the JDC and the director of the local office of the Jewish Agency, Ruth Klüger (later Aliav). During the war, she had been a member of the Mossad Le’aliyah Bet, helping to rescue the Jewish refugees of Europe and smuggle them into Palestine. Scholem and Yaari began trying to obtain entry visas for Germany and Austria, a task that proved to be far from simple. Starting on April 1, restrictions had been imposed on entering Germany, and at this time, in contrast to the previous arrangement, special authorization to enter Germany had to be received from the American military authorities. On April 17, Scholem and Yaari filed their request for entry visas, and it was sent to the American Office of Military Government in Berlin, from which the Americans directed their operations throughout Europe. While waiting for a response, Scholem and Yaari began to gather preliminary information regarding the condition of the books in Frankfurt. News that Pinson was trying to transfer the books to the United States as a temporary refuge had already reached them and aroused concern, as did rumors that many books had been stolen from the warehouses where they had been collected. This information, which increased the urgency of their mission, did not make the waiting for visas any easier. The situation gave them the feeling that they were already too late, and that the chance of reaching the books had been reduced through the American intervention. They were also disappointed by the attitude of the JDC toward them—although it was supposed to be helping them, it was not, in their opinion, trying very hard to do so. As Scholem wrote in a letter to Senator:

Two things have become clear here: (1) That we are at least two or three months too late, and people are bitter about this. They say that it would have been possible to remove a lot of things that we had come for just a short time ago, but meanwhile several Jewish and non-Jewish parties have arisen, to steal whatever is possible for America. (2) The attitude of the JDC is not unequivocal. On the one hand, they want to help without doubt, and they have helped us in small matters here, but on the other hand they are very bureaucratic, and we feel very well that we are disturbing them. . . . We have the impression, though I can’t prove it to you one hundred per-
cent, that the JDC, for reasons of its propaganda in America, would be very favorably disposed to transferring the books to America so they could say: Look what we did for the Jews of America!45

Despite the discouraging situation and the difficulties in obtaining visas, preparations for Scholem and Yaari’s trip to Germany continued. On the recommendation of people from the JDC and the Jewish Agency, they bought US Army uniforms in an officers’ store, after it became clear to them that if the visas arrived, they would only be permitted to circulate in the American occupation zone in military dress. “A very ridiculous appearance,” Scholem reported to Senator, “like in an operetta.”46 In addition, Scholem and Yaari spoke to authorities at the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), asking for the agency’s help in entering Germany by inviting them to do so—a request that was answered in the affirmative—and they submitted a request for a visa to Czechoslovakia to travel to Prague. At the same time, a negative answer came from the authorities in Vienna in response to their request for an entry visa to

Figure 3. Scholem in a US Army uniform with an unknown woman, Paris 1946. From the collection of the National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.
Austria. On May 3, they received notice from Berlin that their request for an entry visa to Germany had been denied, despite the invitation arranged by UNRRA.47

Scholem and Yaari believed that the denial was connected to the general policy of the Americans with respect to the collections of books in Europe, which was essentially to close the book warehouses in the army’s possession—including the one in Offenbach—as soon as possible. The Americans wanted to accomplish this by returning the books whose owners—individuals or institutions—could be identified and to the states from which they had been stolen, leaving it to those states to find the legal owners. The Americans planned to send the remaining books to the United States and to keep them until a final decision about their fate was made. The result, according to Scholem and Yaari, would be that the Jewish people would lose the books. They believed that American Jewish institutions such as the CEJCR were behind the plan to transfer the books to the United States, through the work of Pinson in Germany and other people: “It seems there were several appeals from Jewish figures and institutions in America to the military authorities in America, and lacking a united front and coordinated steps on the part of the Jewish institutions has so far done damage and is likely to cause even further damage, bringing about the absolute loss of these treasures for the Jewish people. We express our opinion that there is an absolute need to establish in America, without any delay, a united front of the Jewish institutions.”48

Following the rejection of their request for entry visas to Germany, the two members of the delegation decided that Yaari should return to Palestine and Scholem should stay in Paris and wait for developments on the diplomatic level,49 as well as for a reply to the request for a visa to Czechoslovakia—and seek to enter Germany disguised as an educator for the JDC giving lectures in displaced person (DP) camps.50 However, waiting for the visa to Czechoslovakia also seemed to be in vain to Scholem. “They won’t let me in,” he wrote in his journal on May 7, “as if particularly bad luck hangs over this entire mission. Everything is as though really under a spell.”51 On May 10, before Yaari’s return to Palestine, information reached Scholem that, thanks to Schwartz’s efforts, the authorities in Berlin had decided to reverse their decision and authorize the delegates from the Hebrew University to enter Germany.52 Despite this positive development, and against Scholem’s recommendation, Yaari decided to abandon the mission and return to Palestine. The documents provide no explanation for his decision. Perhaps it was connected to the slow pace of developments in Paris and the exhausting wait, and perhaps it was also connected to his personal relations with Scholem and the tension between the two since even before the trip.53 In any case, Scholem decided to stay in Europe and later explained his
decision in this way: “I thought (and I still think) it was a severe error to leave this great matter in the middle, as long as there was a true chance for some degree of success. In any event, I myself decided to stay here and see how things would turn out.” On May 15, Yaari left Paris on his way back to Jerusalem.

Paris (May 15–24)

Scholem’s apprehensions about the Americans’ intentions to transfer the Jewish books to the United States were not unwarranted. On May 17, a memorandum from the CEJCR to Rabbi Philip Bernstein, the advisor on Jewish affairs to the US Army in Europe, recommended transferring to the United States the book collections whose owners had not been identified because of the danger threatening the collections from the Soviets, who were demanding the return of property to the countries of the Soviet bloc. According to the memorandum, not only would an official demand from Palestine not be recognized by the powers, but it would also support Soviet claims for the books, because none of the book collections had come from Palestine and no one recognized the legal right of the Yishuv to them. Therefore, the memorandum recommended returning to their owners the books that were privately owned and whose legal owners could be located and placing the books belonging to communities temporarily in trusteeship, until the renewed communities in Europe could grow and be able to use the books. Books without owners should also be placed in trusteeship until their fair distribution among various Jewish communities could be arranged. The most appropriate institution to act as trustee and remove the books from Germany quickly, in the opinion of the CEJCR, was the Library of Congress in Washington, which had already agreed to accept responsibility for the transfer of the Jewish property to the United States—where it would be sorted and redistributed according to the needs of Jewish communities in the world, with the cooperation of the CEJCR. As for the claims of the Hebrew University, the memorandum recommended that “the erection of a Memorial Library at the Hebrew University to commemorate the millions of slaughtered European Jews should be seriously considered.”

These developments exacerbated Scholem’s sense of urgency. He was still in Paris, waiting for an entry visa, and the news did not make the wait any easier. The hope that had arisen in his heart when he heard of the imminent arrival of the much-desired visa dissipated within a short time. In fact, the promised visa disappeared in the labyrinth of US Army bureaucracy. What he received was not an official visa from Berlin, as he had been told to expect, but only a limited and temporary visa. To obtain a real visa, he had to address the authorities in Berlin once again, though they knew nothing about the temporary visa and had
just rejected his previous request. After racing around and making many arrangements, Scholem heard that he had to wait for three more weeks for a final answer to his request. Nonetheless, he decided not to return to Palestine but to wait in Paris as long as there was a ray of hope, as he wrote to Magnes: “At any rate I have decided to stick it out, and would return to Palestine only if I have to give up all hope of doing any real business here.”58 Meanwhile, as he had been doing since he arrived in Paris, he met with the Jews of the city and gained an impression of their situation after the war. For example, he wrote in one of his first reports to Senator: “What I have seen in several conversations with French Jews is very depressing. I have already met with several people, some of them distant relatives of mine who had their children baptized. They explained to me that they had to make their children forget they were Jews.”59 The meetings with the younger generation of Jews in France also disappointed him with regard to their ability to continue Jewish life or to serve as a human reserve for strengthening the Jewish center in the Land of Israel. As he wrote to Magnes, “they are not at all in the state of mind that we supposed them to be and the trends leading away from Judaism are stronger than the opposite ones, as far as I can see.”60 Scholem also learned that his mother had died. Betty Scholem had fled to Australia in 1939 and been living there with her two elder sons.61 This sad news deepened his gloom into apparent depression:

May 17. Yesterday night I learned that Mother died on May 5 while we were touring Versailles! At the moment we were talking about her with a friend of Pflaum’s father,62 she breathed her last. I was expecting this news for several weeks and now I still feel like a fossil, petrified to the heart. I don’t know—what a horrible feeling of petrification, of loss is gradually increasing in me, and it won’t let me take a proper accounting of my world. In the past years Mother was a larger matter in my life than earlier. Her figure grew clearer as she passed seventy and the lights glowed from there, and I was more connected with her soul in several respects. The suffering in Australia brought her close to us, and the courage of her spirit surprised us. I had an easy mother, who didn’t try to intervene and also knew how to maintain herself with great wisdom. What distanced me from her in earlier years, about thirty years ago, was blurred and ceased to exist. . . . I imagine that her real life was very hard, and she prevailed with a strong spirit.63

Scholem found a friend in Klüger of the Jewish Agency. Their long meetings and conversations while he was in Paris consoled him in difficult moments. Klüger was also the one who suggested that he should go to Switzerland for a week and try to obtain a visa to Czechoslovakia from there. “In fact it is on my mind to do that,” Scholem wrote in his diary, “because this evening I received an
invitation from there, as it happens, from Dr. Hurwitz, a dentist, to visit him for a few days.” A week later Scholem arrived in Zurich.

Zurich (May 24–June 5)

“The enormous difficulties that I encountered in Paris evaporated as though by the wave of a magic wand when I finally went to Switzerland,” Scholem wrote in a report to the Hebrew University. Indeed, with the help of Siegmund Hurwitz, a dentist and Jungian psychologist who had personal connections with the assistant Czechoslovakian consul, Scholem immediately received visa allowing him to travel to Prague, with no difficulty. However, the trip had to be delayed by about ten days because there was no available transportation to the Czech capital.

The stay in Zurich brought an upturn not only in Scholem’s mission but also in his mood, as he once again saw sights familiar to him from his youth. “Zurich is marvelous,” he wrote in his diary, “and without chocolate, because two weeks ago restrictions on it were limited, and after that people stormed into the stores like savages and bought it all, and there is none to be found!!” Scholem spent the days of waiting with his new friends, Hurwitz and Rebecca Schärf, who was also close to Carl Gustav Jung, talking about Scholem’s work and research in Kabbalah. The two received him with more than a little enthusiasm: “They’re really killing themselves for me!” he wrote in his diary.

Through these new friends, Scholem met Jung on May 27 and spoke with him about Kabbalah. “An evening with Professor Jung, the psychologist,” he wrote in his diary on the day following the meeting. “Meir warned me about his suspicion of him regarding his previous Nazi inclinations. . . . [But] he listened carefully.” The meeting left Scholem with an equivocal impression of Jung, especially with regard to his earlier connections with Nazi ideology and the Nazi movement, as Scholem wrote in his diary several days later: “Yesterday with Dr. Schärf, a conversation about Jung and the Nazis. An effort to cleanse him of the accusations against him—apparently accused justly according to what I learn from his defense.” The meeting with members of Jung’s circle and the long conversations with Schärf and Hurwitz reached a peak in an evening in Scholem’s honor at Hurwitz’s home, where Scholem spoke about Sabbateanism with a group of local intellectuals. These initial connections and Scholem’s attraction to Jung’s associates grew stronger over the years and were expressed in his regular participation in the Eranos conferences, which are discussed at length in the chapter dealing with Scholem’s participation in Eranos. As Scholem stated, the stay in Zurich was a time of “recovery in all of the confusion and nerve-wracking disappointments of this journey.”
Prague (June 5–24)

A few days after Scholem and Yaari left Palestine on their way to Paris, a letter from Bergmann was received by Senator in Jerusalem, containing details about large collections of books in Prague and Bratislava. According to Bergmann’s investigations, the only difficulties to be anticipated in transferring the books from Prague to the Hebrew University would be not with the local authorities, but with the Jewish community. This information was quickly conveyed to Scholem, who was already in Paris, and it was a decisive factor in his decision to travel to Czechoslovakia.

The source of the collections of books that Bergmann had reported on was not Czechoslovakia, but they had been transferred there from Berlin by the Nazis. The libraries stolen from the conquered countries had been collected and sorted in Berlin by Jewish forced laborers at the RSHA and the ERR. Transfer of the collections from the capital to border areas of the Third Reich—mostly to castles in small towns in Silesia and Czechoslovakia—began in 1943, to find shelter for them and save them from Allied bombing. In that way a very large collection of Jewish books and manuscripts, about a quarter of a million volumes, had reached the Niemes (Mimoň, in Czech) castle in northern Bohemia. A smaller collection of about 60,000 books had been transferred from Berlin to the Theresienstadt concentration camp by the RSHA, preserved there, and sorted by Jewish experts. The concentration camp also had its own library, which was built by the Nazis for propaganda purposes. This library served the prisoners as part of the illusion of relatively normal life that characterized that camp. In September 1945, the books were transferred to the Jewish Central Museum in Prague. This museum had been established by the Jewish community of the city in 1906 but was closed by the Nazis in 1941. In 1942 it was reopened as a repository for objects of art, ritual objects, and books that had belonged to exterminated Jewish communities. It is not clear whether this reopening was an initiative of the Jewish community to preserve Jewish property until the end of the war, or of the Nazi authorities as part of their effort to preserve evidence of the existence of what they called the Jewish race as they destroyed it. In any event, during the war the museum served as a kind of warehouse for stolen Jewish property, and after the war it contained 213,096 items, about a third of which were books. Books from Theresienstadt were added to this collection.

Scholem arrived in Prague on a flight from Zurich, which he described as “two and a half hours, uncomfortable seats like in a tram, in a Czech plane, but with God’s help the weather during the flight was excellent.” Almost two months after leaving Palestine, Scholem could finally devote his time to the task for which he had been sent: locating stolen Jewish books and examining the possibility of
transferring them to the National and University Library in Jerusalem. Since he arrived in Prague on Shavuot, which overlapped with the Christian holiday of Pentecost in that year, a lot of people were on vacation, and he could not move forward until June 11. However, he managed to meet with Paul März, the Jewish Agency’s representative in Prague, who expressed willingness to help in any way he could. He also met with the historian Rabbi Otto Muneles, with whom he visited the Jewish museum and who estimated that there were about a hundred thousand books there from Bohemia and a similar number from Theresienstadt. The collection’s condition concerned Scholem, as he wrote in a report to the Hebrew University on his activities in Prague: “Almost all of it is still packed in boxes, and direct examination is impossible. Storage in stinking cartons in half-damp cellars gives reason for concern.”

Scholem was very impressed by the museum’s enormous art collections, which he said could fill many museums. But he saw little chance of successfully bringing these collections to Palestine because of their fame and the great interest already shown in them by various art historians. He suggested leaving a discussion of the art objects to a later time.

Scholem spent the following days in conversations with the heads of the Jewish community of Prague and with the president of the council of the Jewish communities of Bohemia and Moravia. Through these conversations he managed to persuade them to send the books from Theresienstadt, which were in Prague and had come from Germany (that is, not the books from Bohemia and Moravia) to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, which would become their trustee. He also made use of his time in Prague to hunt for valuable books in the collections of the museum, but the content of the books he found was not what he had hoped for. “A few valuable collections, but nothing exciting,” he wrote in his diary. His visit to the Smichov quarter of the city on June 11 also failed to lead to significant discoveries: “In the afternoon, a visit to the Smichov quarter, where, in the hall of the cemetery, the books of the Jews of Prague are piled up, tens of thousands of volumes, 80%–90% prayer books and Bibles, in fact it’s all worthless. It’s stored badly, by the way. Halls with no windows, broken bookshelves, moisture, and mice can do as they please. In comparison, the things from Theresienstadt are stored better.”

On the morning of June 22, after a three-day trip to Bratislava and Vienna, he received the happy news that his request for the much-desired visa to Germany had been approved. Diplomatic efforts and pressures in the United States and the endeavors of the JDC in Paris had borne fruit. In Berlin an entry visa was granted with the help of authorizations from UNRRA, allowing Scholem to travel to Germany as an educator from the JDC, dressed in a US Army uniform. Two days later he flew back to Paris.
The books that Scholem had seen in Prague did not constitute the large and precious collection he was seeking, and thus they were a disappointment. He did not get to the large repository in Niemes in this trip, though according to some accounts he was able to determine that very important books and manuscripts had been sent to this collection—if it was still there. Nevertheless, he wrote to the Hebrew University that “my actions here mainly succeeded more than I had estimated at first.” His success was in making a preliminary connection that eventually led to the transfer of many books to the university.

Paris, Bad Arolsen, Frankfurt, and Offenbach (June 24–July 18)

In Paris Scholem made final preparations for entry into the American occupation zone in Germany. He had no idea of the length of the planned trip and what he would find there, as he wrote to the Hebrew University from Prague: “How long I will stay in Germany I cannot say in advance. It is hard for me to imagine that it will be less than a month. Everything depends on what can be done there, and it will also be impossible for me not to spend a lot or a little time camouflaging myself as someone from the JDC, who has come to look into matters of culture and education. In any event, I will of course visit the [DP] camps. First I will go to Frankfurt, and from there to Munich. Apparently my authorization is also good for the British zone.”

A week later, in a personal letter to Magnes from Paris, he wrote in a different tone: “If it were possible, I would return to the Land of Israel from there [Germany], because I am very tired.” He went on to tell about his preparations before the trip. For example, he had learned from further conversations with JDC people that their attitude toward him and his mission had not changed: “The heads of the JDC announced ‘unofficially’ to me that in their opinion, and to their deep regret, I should not expect energetic cooperation from Professor Koppel Pinson in Frankfurt. I took the hint [the sentence is in English in the original].” At the end of the letter he added: “I thought that my mission would end on July 1, and I could return to my work, but it’s just beginning to develop! A person who travels in Europe now has to be prepared to lose a lot of time!”

On July 1, Scholem left Paris on a night train to Frankfurt. “I couldn’t sleep,” he wrote in his diary the following day, “because of the snoring of the man sharing the compartment.” Upon his arrival in Frankfurt he discovered that he could not begin working before he was in possession of the appropriate residence permit. To get one he had to go to the American military headquarters in the spa town of Bad Arolsen, which was near Kassel. For technical reasons, Scholem had to stay in Bad Arolsen for two additional days, and he used the delay to travel in the area in a military jeep. “A charming town,” he wrote in his diary.
“The landscape is so beautiful, the peace all around—and the Germans stare at you.”92 The next day, on July 4, he returned to Frankfurt with the proper papers.

Frankfurt became a divided city after the war. The American part, on one side of the city, was restored, busy, throbbing, and full of vitality, as Weltsch described it in his notes from the city on the trip to Europe he made in 1946: “American vehicles of all types fill the streets, army people and administration officials in uniform rush about and liven up some parts of the city, the important American offices are the centers and crossroads. . . . All the houses that were worth repairing have been properly repaired and equipped with modern conveniences, including (even excessive) central heating.” In contrast, the larger part of the city, where the Germans lived, lay in ruins: “There entire streets have been wiped off the face of the earth, but in all the dark alleys, that the people have dug through the piles of debris, people are walking: and you wonder, how and where can people live there?”93 Nevertheless, the trams were running even in that part of the city, and while Weltsch was there a production of Beethoven’s Fidelio was put on at the city’s opera house. The separation between the Germans and the Americans in the city was almost absolute: except for those Germans who came to work and serve the people living in the American part, the two groups did not mix at all.

The focus of Scholem’s interest in Frankfurt was actually on the other side of the Main, the OAD in Offenbach. When Pomrenze, its director, began working in the OAD, there were more than a million and a half books to be sorted out and returned to their owners.94 Many years later he described his feelings at the sight of the books on taking up his new task: “My first impressions of the Offenbach Collecting Point were overwhelming and amazing at once. As I stood before a seemingly endless sea of cases and books, I thought what a horrible mess! What could I do with all these materials? How could I carry out my assignment successfully? Beyond the mess, however, was an even larger mission. Indeed, the only action possible was to return the items to their owners as quickly as possible.”95

Indeed, under Pomrenze’s direction, the work proceeded efficiently and quickly during the six weeks when he was responsible for sorting and returning the books. At that time large consignments of books were sent back to their countries of origin, when it was possible to determine where they belonged. The first shipment, a truck with 371 crates of books, left for Holland on March 12. In that month books were also sent to France and Belgium.96 At the same time, as material was discovered throughout the American occupation zone, more books continued to arrive at the warehouse, and as of May 1, the OAD became the only place where books and printed matter were to be collected for the purpose of restitution.97 On April 15, Pomrenze was replaced by Captain Isaac Bencowitz,
a chemist by profession, who was also Jewish and who remained as the director until October. When Bencowitz assumed responsibility for the warehouse, about 30,000 books were being identified and sorted per day. This was done by eleven sorting teams consisting of German citizens. Since none of the German workers could read Hebrew letters, the books in Hebrew and Yiddish were set aside, awaiting separate treatment.98

Upon Pinson’s intervention, 25,000 Yiddish books whose owners could not be identified were lent to the JDC for use of the residents of the DP camps throughout Germany, where there was a great lack of material for educational and cultural activity. By the end of April, the JDC had received 20,000 volumes from the warehouse.99

By the time Bencowitz became the director, more than a million items had already been returned to their owners, and about 800,000 remained in the warehouse.100 The fate of these books was to be determined in accordance with official policy, which the American occupation authorities had yet to determine. The origins of some of the books were unknown or only partially known; some of them were from Germany or regions conquered by the Soviet Union, whose governments that the Americans did not recognize.101 The examination and sorting of the roughly 500,000 books in these categories were Scholem’s purpose

**Figure 4** Books at the Offenbach Archival Depot. 1946. From a photo album of the OAD made by Isaac Bencowitz. Yad Vashem Photo Archive, FA2 73 2/18.
when he reached Offenbach. At the end of June, warehouse workers had sorted 267,400 unowned books, and of them 43 percent (114,800) were in Hebrew and 16 percent (42,000) in German, with Jewish content. Moreover, just before Scholem’s arrival, items from the library of the rabbinical seminary in Breslau had been identified in the warehouse, as well as items from the libraries of the Jewish communities in Frankfurt and Berlin and from the library of the Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut (Yiddish Scientific Institute YIVO) in Vilna, community registers, and about six hundred manuscripts (including a significant collection of manuscripts of Habad Hasidism).

As soon as he arrived in Frankfurt, Scholem met with Pinson, who was going to leave Germany in two weeks, and Bencowitz. In contrast to Scholem’s expectations, Pinson greeted him cordially. At their meeting, Pinson “spoke copiously about his great heroism in saving and transferring books,” and he immediately suggested that Scholem should work in the warehouse to identify and sort the Hebrew manuscripts there. Pinson complained to Scholem about the JDC people, who, in his opinion, had no interest in culture or Jewish cultural treasures, thus revealing some of the internal tensions in the organization. “Pinson poured out his anger at the JDC, just as they poured out their anger at him,” Scholem wrote in his diary on July 5. “It’s interesting to hear both sides.”

On July 6, almost three months after his arrival in Europe, Scholem reached his destination, the OAD. His first survey of the building gave him an impression of the situation: “First visit to Offenbach—for two hours I wandered around the building with Pinson and saw all the arrangements. Masses of books and disorganized heaps, instructions that make anything possible! But we are entirely too late. Something could have been done a few months ago, if we had sent the right people to them. The two heads [of the warehouses] are Jews who want to help but are more afraid of the authorities than the people in Prague. The only one who manages to get along with them—Pinson, who can in fact take the really precious things away from here!!”

That evening Scholem spoke with Bencowitz about the aims of the Hebrew University and its hopes of transferring the books for preservation to the National Library in Jerusalem. Bencowitz opposed the university’s general guidelines and agreed to help Scholem only to transfer books to the United States, on condition that he received appropriate authorization to transfer the YIVO books to the organization’s branch in New York. At the same time he advised Scholem to remove the books from the warehouse quickly, as Scholem noted in his diary: “The only thing that [Bencowitz] is willing to do is to smuggle a few thousand books [out] along with the YIVO books, when an official order is given for their benefit (which still doesn’t exist). About all the things that are important to us in
the Land of Israel he said: Forget about it! [Bencowitz’s remark is in English in the original]. My advice is to hurry very very fast to reach a decision in Washington, because after him a German director will come, and he will do whatever he can to transfer the books to German ownership.”

Scholem’s meetings with Pinson and Bencowitz during the first three days of his stay in Offenbach made the general condition of the various warehoused collections clear to him. His summary of these conversations draws a disappointing picture. First, he realized he had arrived too late, and most of the work of sorting the books and returning them to their owners had already been done, in the hope of closing the warehouse in the near future. In addition, administration of the warehouse was about to pass into German hands, which would prevent the remaining books from being transferred to Jewish ownership. In addition, contrary to reports that had reached Palestine, most of the books had not originally been owned by Jews, nor did they have Jewish content. The large Jewish libraries of Germany and Austria were not in Offenbach. The situation was particularly dire with respect to manuscripts: “In Offenbach there were only a few hundred (about 400) Hebrew manuscripts, and without exception not a single one from the big collections, but from the communities of southern Germany and the Baltic countries. There is almost nothing of value, [no] really ancient thing—not at all.”

In light of these discoveries, Scholem later stated that “with respect to the search for cultural treasures in the sense of rare books, important manuscripts, or precious archival material, the depot in Offenbach is a disappointment.” The conversations with Pinson also left Scholem no room for doubt: there was no chance that all or even part the books would be transferred to Palestine. However, Pinson agreed to cooperate with the Hebrew University and told Scholem that the various Jewish organizations must first of all unite in their efforts to remove as many books as possible from Germany. As Scholem wrote in a report on his conversations in Offenbach that he sent to the Hebrew University: “In the present state of affairs, I am sorry to say he is right. In Paris or New York we, that is, the Jewish people, still will lose less of these things than if they stay here.”

The main idea that arose was to prepare a repository of Jewish books in a Jewish center outside of Germany, to transfer the maximum number of books to that repository as quickly as possible, and only then to consider how the books should be distributed among the various Jewish centers. The most important thing was for world Jewry to present a single front to the American occupation authorities. These conversations seem to have effected a change in Scholem’s approach to his mission in Germany and to the rescue of books. The danger threatening the books from the planned change in management of the OAD, as well as the thefts
of books by workers in the warehouse, convinced him that it was necessary to act quickly and in concert with the Jews of the United States to move the books somewhere that would be the property of the Jewish people. On July 9, the day when he dictated the report, Scholem sent a telegram to Magnes, who was in the United States, urging him to reach a decision about the books: “Unless decision reached before August danger imminent Jews lose all.” Scholem maintained that position at the end of his trip as well, as shown in what he wrote from Paris to Stephen Wise, the head of the World Jewish Congress, shortly before returning to Palestine:

Everybody to whom I spoke, including the people of the Fine Arts and Monuments Commission, implored me to do what I could to work for one policy to be advocated. They say that if the Jews between themselves are divided, even the State Department will be afraid of making a decision, and the whole business may linger for years. To this must be added the fact that I have not found anybody who thinks it possible that a direct transfer of the libraries to Palestine may be achieved, and no decision on that line is within our reach. On the other hand, I consider it very important to get these collections, as far as they are still there, out of Germany as soon as possible. The longer they remain there, the greater the danger will be of losing parts of them. Any place outside Germany would be better than to leave them at their present place,
although they are now kept in boxes after having been sorted in a very summary fashion. 113

Scholem spent the following days working in the warehouse in Offenbach, identifying and sorting various manuscripts and books. Since most of the books had already been placed in crates, which had then been sealed, the main task remaining was consultation and assistance in various areas, as well as sorting piles of books in German and Latin. During the days he spent in the warehouse, Scholem grew to understand the problems and limitations inherent in his mission, in the manner and timing in which it was undertaken, and the errors made in evaluating the situation from Palestine. As he wrote in a letter to Magnes:

I dealt with organizing manuscripts and other special books. Next week I will deal with material from the border countries, and every day I weep, seeing how much I could have done, if I had come by April, as planned, when most of the books had not yet been returned to crates according to the new arrangement, and it would have been possible for me to have a large influence on the arrangement and the instructions issued for it. Now only limited possibilities remain to give good and acceptable advice, and that is what I am trying to do. . . . The main job that should have been done, and that I cannot do, is, in my opinion: searching for the vast buried and hidden material. That work would have required two conditions, which were not clear to us in Jerusalem: (1) a very long time, because this is a matter of “espionage,” to find what the Americans and the English didn’t find. (2) total freedom of movement, which was completely denied to me for reasons of the occupation authorities and of the conditions under which the JDC obtained my entry into Germany. 114

Scholem’s resentment against the JDC and its attitude toward him and his mission increased. “The JDC office is not cooperating,” he wrote in his diary on July 9. “That is the director is not interested in my mission, and I have the impression she is sabotaging me politely.” 115 Two weeks later, before his trip to Munich, Scholem wrote in his diary: “The bitterness of my heart and my disappointment about the attitude of the JDC to me is growing.” 116 In contrast, good tidings arrived that reduced the sense of urgency: the American authorities decided that Bencowitz would not leave in August as had been planned, but would remain the director of the warehouse for three more months, which would delay its transfer to German hands as well as its closing. In addition, in response to proposals for the future of the books submitted by the CEJCR to the US War Department, the latter ordered the American authorities in Germany not to send any more shipments of books from the warehouse without authorization of the State Department. 117 This delayed the return of the books to their country.
of origin and gave the Jewish organizations more time to have the books sent elsewhere.

**Heidelberg (July 18)**

On July 18, Scholem went to Heidelberg for an eight-hour visit. He met three German intellectuals there: the Catholic publisher, Lambert Schneider; the Protestant philosopher and physician, Viktor von Weizsäcker, a friend of Buber; and the philosopher Karl Jaspers, whose pioneering book dealing with German guilt after the Holocaust was published in early 1946 by Schneider. These three men all played an important and active role in rebuilding German culture after the war, and they had been close to Judaism and Scholem’s friends from before the war—especially Buber and Ernst Simon, the religious philosopher and educator. Scholem sent Simon a long letter the day after his return to Frankfurt, reporting on his visit to Heidelberg in detail.

In Heidelberg, Scholem spent the most time with Schneider. As mentioned in chapter 1, before the war he had owned a publishing house bearing his name in Berlin and had then worked with Moshe Spitzer for Salman Schocken’s publishing house there, corresponding with Scholem about possible publication projects. After the war, Schneider opened another publishing house under his name, this time in Heidelberg. Schneider was very pleased to hear from Scholem about their common friends in Jerusalem, especially Buber, Spitzer, and Schocken. Scholem told Simon that Schneider had left Berlin in 1943, after the last employee who worked under him in the Schocken publishing house, Erich Loewenthal, was sent to Auschwitz. After the war Schneider settled in Heidelberg, and at the time of Scholem’s visit he was the father of a three-year-old boy and three adopted children. The first big project of his new publishing house was a magazine, *Die Wandlung*, which was in existence from 1945 to 1949. This publication was edited by Jaspers; Dolf Sternberger, a political scientist; Werner Krauss, a scholar of Romance languages; and Alfred Weber, a sociologist of culture and the brother of the sociologist Max Weber. Among those writing for this journal were Jaspers, Hannah Arendt, T. S. Eliot, Rudolf Bultmann, and Weizsäcker. The name of the journal can be translated into English as “the change” or “the metamorphosis.” However, another possible meaning is rooted in Catholicism, as “Wandlung” also refers to the miracle of transubstantiation, wherein the consecrated bread and wine of communion are transmuted into the body and blood of Jesus. In any case, the name largely represents the self-understanding of the members of the circle, which was surprisingly similar to what could also be heard in those years in the Jewish D P camps. In his introduction to the first issue of *Die Wandlung*, Jaspers states: “We have lost almost
everything: state, economy, certain conditions of our physical human being and worse than this: the values and norms which bind us, the moral dignity, the united self-consciousness as a people. Yet Germany has not lost everything: We survivors (Überlebenden) are still here. We have no possessions but we are here. Indeed, we have no property upon which we can rest, nor have we the possession of memory; indeed, we are at a most radical point; nevertheless the fact that we are alive has to have some significance. From nothingness we will recover.”

The aims of the journal, as Jaspers presented them in his introduction, were to prepare German society for a change and then initiate that change, to renew Germans’ sense of responsibility along with their feelings of mutual trust and commitment to the values of freedom and humanism, and to work toward the spiritual and physical reconstruction of Germany. This publication was not the only one in postwar Germany that sought to build a new society. Rather, it was part of a general trend. Scholem’s German colleagues, like the survivors in the DP camps and the delegates of the Yishuv in Europe, confronted the ruin that characterized the present and an unclear future, full of dangers they would have to cope with. From different sides, many people were seeking to build a future out of the ruins. In addition, the people whom Scholem met had to deal with a hostile intellectual environment in Heidelberg, where there were many Nazis and former Nazis. At the time of Scholem’s visit, the circle that had formed around Die Wandlung to achieve spiritual renewal had had limited success, as Scholem reported to Simon: “If the Americans were to leave tomorrow, the people connected with Die Wandlung . . . would be shot down in the street in broad daylight, . . . Die Wandlung is truly a matter of the veteran non-Nazis from before 1933, and the name has not yet been justified.” Although the situation in Heidelberg was difficult, Scholem heard from Schneider that he wanted to begin publishing books on Jewish subjects again, because of the large demand for them at that time among the non-Jewish Germans of the city.

After parting from Schneider, Scholem met with Weizsäcker and spoke with him for about an hour, mainly about Buber. Before the war Weizsäcker had been a neurologist in Heidelberg; during the war he had been a professor of neurology in Breslau; and after it, in 1945, he had returned to Heidelberg. His actions during the war were a matter of dispute, because in the city of Loben (Lubliniec, in Polish), which is near Breslau, a Nazi institution euthanized children and youths with physical and mental disabilities. To this day the degree of Weizsäcker’s knowledge of what was done in that institution is not clear, though he definitely took no active part in it. He was a friend of Buber and in 1926–28, along with the theologian Joseph Wittig, he edited Die Kreatur, a magazine that was published by Schneider.
mail service in the American occupation zone was poor, he asked Scholem to
tell Buber how he and their common friends were doing. Weizsäcker especially
wanted to tell Buber that his two sons were assumed to be dead because they
had not returned from the Russian front, but his two daughters were safe and
sound.129

Scholem had dinner with Jaspers and his Jewish wife. There the conversation
revolved around events in Palestine and their mutual acquaintances, Hans Jonas
and Hannah Arendt. They also spoke about Scholem’s work and about Jaspers’s
biblical theology. During this conversation, Scholem’s driver, who was waiting
in the car to take him home, honked the horn, and because Scholem did not
want to accept Jaspers’s invitation to spend the night there on his first visit, he
decided to return to Frankfurt that evening. Scholem left Heidelberg with good
impressions of the city and the desire to visit his acquaintances there again. He
wrote to Simon, “But maybe I’ll go there once again before returning to Paris,
because there were a few people there, with whom it was good to converse.”130
Indeed, a month later, a few days before returning home, Scholem went back to
Heidelberg for two days and stayed with Schneider. Scholem’s visits to Heidel-
berg made a deep impression on Schneider, and the memory of them remained
vivid twenty years later, as he wrote to Scholem: “Like you, my wife and I have not
forgotten the three days in 1946 when you came to us, dressed in a uniform, and
from every pocket you gave candy to the children. In your uniform you looked
grouchy. You didn’t suit the uniform, and the uniform didn’t suit you. Thus the
children saw the first Jew in their lives, in a strange disguise. You could write a
novel about that.”131

Frankfurt and Offenbach (July 18–24)

In the days following his return from Heidelberg, Scholem finished his work
in the OAD, as he wrote to Magnes on July 22: “I’ve actually finished my work in
Offenbach. I was able to give technical advice after looking over everything that
was happening in this work. I hope it will be good. I don’t think it’s possible
to do very much more.”132 During his time in the American occupation zone in
Germany, in addition to his work in the warehouse, Scholem visited the survi-
vors in the DP camps in the area of Frankfurt and Munich. These visits were part
of his camouflage as an educational emissary to Germany of the JDC, but one
may assume that he had a personal interest in educational activity among the
refugees and in meeting with them. On July 11, for example, he spoke for two
hours in the Zeilsheim Camp near Frankfurt. “I gave a lecture about the spiritual
atmosphere in the Land of Israel,” he wrote in his diary, “and this was met with
great interest.”133
Scholem’s visit to the DP camp and encounter with its residents made a deep impression on him, and he lectured on the experience after his return to Jerusalem and wrote about it for Haaretz. He wrote that Jewish life in post-war Germany had given him “a dreadful feeling of depression.” In his opinion, the problem of the camps was not that they lacked material supplies: “People aren’t hungry there the way the Germans are hungry. The residents of the camps receive twice as many rations as the Germans.” The problem was in the spiritual and psychological realm: the residents’ severe demoralization derived from their long stay on German soil, lack of desire to work, and from idleness that led to friction among them—for example, about how each of them had survived the concentration and extermination camps, and whether anyone had acted immorally to save him- or herself. Many refugees had left the camps and gone to live in various cities of Germany, and some of them had begun to deal on the black market and integrating themselves that way into the German economy, “so that a new Diaspora is forming, not of German Jews, but of Polish Jews in Germany.” Another possibility open to the people in the camps was emigration to the United States, though this was not easy: the American consulates in Germany made it very difficult to obtain the necessary authorization. Emigrating to the Land of Israel seemed even more difficult because of the increased tension there between the British, the Yishuv, and the Arabs, and the latter two groups’ acts of hostility toward each other. For those refugees who wished to move to Palestine, the waiting in Europe became unbearable. Here is how Scholem described to Magnes a meeting with young people in the Zeilsheim camp: “I saw some Jewish students who want to study with us, and all of them asked whether there was a way for a student to immigrate and study—and I had no answer. The mood here, which is created by the lack of any possibility of immigration soon—cannot be described in words. The damage is enormous and dreadful, and really everyone you meet weeps because of the spreading degeneration. And it is hard to see. I try to see something of the camps and I spoke in places where they asked me to speak, and for the first time in my life I gave a speech in Yiddish!”

The fact that Scholem had to speak in Yiddish reflects the level of knowledge of Hebrew in the camp. After his return to Palestine, he said that at the time of his visit to the camp, of its 3,500 residents only 180 were studying Hebrew, and they did not keep at it, although there were good opportunities in the camp to learn the language. “I spoke with a few people,” Scholem wrote, “and I said to them: ‘After all, you’re idle for eight hours a day—learn Hebrew eight hours a day for eight months, and when you get to the Land of Israel, you’ll know the language perfectly.’ They say: ‘We will see when we get to the Land of Israel.’ I say to them: ‘In the Land of Israel you’ll have other worries!’ But they won’t study.”
Like many of the emissaries of the Yishuv, who met the refugees at a relatively late stage in their liberation, Scholem was critical of them. Irit Keynan notes that the survivors made two different kinds of impressions on the emissaries. On the one hand, one finds expressions of idealization of the refugees and praise for their psychological resilience, and on the other hand, there are voices that emphasize the negative phenomena that developed in the camps. Keynan attributes the differences to the time of the encounter between emissaries and survivors and its meaning for the Zionist enterprise: The closer the encounter was to the time of liberation, before the establishment of a routine in the DP camps, the greater was the emissaries’ identification with and empathy for the survivors. And for Zionists from Palestine, the encounters were laden with great tension. To realize the Zionist idea, the Yishuv desperately needed immigrants, and the possibility of losing this human resource was a matter of life or death for the entire Zionist movement.

According to Scholem, most of the refugees interested in moving to Palestine wanted to go there not because of Zionist motivations, but primarily because of their desire to leave Europe and not to live in non-Jewish surroundings. Their hope was simply to live their lives in tranquility from now on. When it became clear that the situation in Palestine was more complicated than they had thought, and their chances were small of obtaining the harmony and quiet they desired, they began to doubt the wisdom of immigrating, and the Zionists’ efforts in the camps were undermined. The constant news about the rising tension in Palestine encouraged the refugees to seek other solutions for themselves. As a Zionist, Scholem’s encounter with the refugees in the camps was disappointing, depressing, and worrying—these were not the sort of people through whom the Zionist idea was going to be accomplished. His impression was that most of them had no interest in Zionism but were concerned with the material problems of life, and those who were Zionists were troubled by the difficult situation in the Land of Israel. Nor was he pleased with the Zionists among the refugees who were living in camps described as training kibbutzim (kibbutzei hakhsharah) —groups of refugees who were preparing themselves in separate encampments in Germany for agricultural life in the Land of Israel. Scholem perceived a contradiction among the people living in the training kibbutzim, in that they yearned for the Land of Israel but at the same time were cultivating the hated land of Germany as farmers. In general, he had a very negative opinion of most of these kibbutzim, as he wrote after his return: “As a matter of principle, the people refuse to lift a finger in Germany; and some of them go so far as to say: we won’t even consider tidying up our room—let the shikse (non-Jewish woman) work. But they live together and call it a kibbutz. In general they misuse that
term: five merchants on the black market, who live together and employ two shikses, are called a kibbutz. Of course, there are some real kibbutzim. But the term, as a magic word, is so common, that it has lost its real content in their use of the language.”142

In the face of all these problems, Scholem felt helpless: “Who can give advice to a person after all he has undergone over the years, in the presence of the current events now?”143 Indeed, the violent events in Palestine in the summer of 1946 put the emissaries in the camps in Germany in a difficult situation between two worlds. The first world had been destroyed, and the second, which was supposed to provide a solution for the catastrophe of the first, was in grave danger. Haim Avni, the emissary of the Histadrut, described this complex situation in notes from the summer of 1946, when he was sent to the DP camps in Germany by the World Zionist Organization: “It is difficult to understand this world if one draws a line in thought connecting this station, which is named ‘UNRRA camps,’ to our final destination—the Land of Israel. One’s heart freezes, and one’s eyes grow dull with huge magnitude of abysmal pain, while comparing these two pictures: the Land of Israel under siege and this horrible exile.”144

Nor was Scholem indifferent to the troubling news that was reaching him about the situation in Palestine and the increasingly violent events there. He concluded a letter to Magnes with the following words: “The news from the Land of Israel is so depressing and makes all our work harder. How painful to read in sensational telegrams about the destruction of what we are building.”145 On that day, July 22, the Irgun blew up the King David Hotel in Jerusalem.

After returning from his first visit to Heidelberg and finishing most of his work in Offenbach, Scholem devoted his remaining time in Frankfurt to searching for Jewish books in the municipal library, which had been established and financed by contributions of the Jews of Frankfurt in the second half of the nineteenth century.146 During Nazi rule the books in the library remained in place, because the mayor refused to deliver them to the national government. To Scholem’s great disappointment, when he visited the library he learned that its valuable Hebraica department had been entirely burned in bombing attacks by the Allies on March 18, 1944.147 However, the items in the Judaica department and several manuscripts owned by the library were saved. This news encouraged Scholem, as did an important conversation he held with the recently appointed director of the library, Hanns Wilhelm Eppelsheimer. A socialist, Eppelsheimer had been married to a Jewish woman and refused to divorce her during the entire Nazi period (she died of illness in 1946). Nehemya Allony, who met Eppelsheimer in January 1952 to discuss the possibility of photographing the Hebrew manuscripts for the National and University Library, described him as “a man with graying
hair, tall and solidly built, with a nose like a potato and one lip drooping down. A man of open and fluent conversation.” Eppelsheimer made a very favorable impression on Allony: “This man is a liberal of the decidedly good and fine type of the Germany before Hitler and before Kaiser Wilhelm,” he wrote in his notes.148

Scholem proposed to Eppelsheimer that the Frankfurt municipal library transfer its Hebrew manuscripts to the Hebrew University. This request to give up the treasures of the library was based on the fact that all the manuscripts and books had been purchased for it and contributed by Jews—or, as Scholem wrote, “they were all bought with Jewish money.” He said that the transfer would “be a simple step to repair the injustice that cannot be described in words.”149 Scholem’s proposal was in fact an extension of the policy recommended in the memorandum of the legal committee of the Diaspora Treasures Committee submitted in February, a policy of demanding that Hebrew books and manuscripts in German public libraries be transferred to the Jewish people.150 Scholem felt that Eppelsheimer’s response was very positive. “He was very sympathetic and willing to consider it with his municipal authorities,” Scholem wrote.151 During the conversation, the two men agreed that giving the books and manuscripts to the Hebrew University must be a moral gesture of restitution to the Jewish people via the university. In this spirit, Eppelsheimer insisted that all the steps to be taken had to be made by the Germans, not by the Jews.152 When he went to Munich, Scholem pursued this line of action—making contacts with the local authorities for the purpose of transferring Jewish cultural treasures from public libraries in Germany to the Hebrew University.

Munich (July 24–29)

In the introduction to an English guidebook to the city, the first to be published after the war,153 Karl Scharnagl, mayor of Munich in 1946, described the situation in the city this way: “The Munich of old, the pride of Bavarians and the Mecca of visitors from all over the world, is no more. Instead, we have desolate wastes, and ruins that gaze on us accusingly from hollow eyes; the bitter heritage of an age of horrors. And yet life does not stand still, if it does not of itself give up the struggle, nor has the Munich heart, as the saying has it, ‘the golden Munich heart,’ ceased to beat.”154 To a great extent, Scharnagl’s words represent the way in which Munich’s citizens saw their city at the end of World War II. On the one hand, there is a romantic nostalgia about its past, before the Nazi regime, and on the other hand (sometimes simultaneously), there is a look toward the future of the city and a call for its physical and cultural reconstruction.

Interestingly, a similar situation prevailed among the Jewish population of the city and in the dp camps around it. Despair in the face of the vast destruction of
the present left the refugees in the area with the same two possibilities: basking in memories of the distant past as a way of coping with the difficult experiences of the more recent past, or yearning for—and sometimes acting to bring about—a utopian future. Avni described the state of the Jews of the city and its surroundings this way:

In the narrow street you’ll always find people, mostly young men, roaming about and looking for something. I believe that they are seeking content in their lives. In the morning they get up and don’t know what for. The day passes and night comes. If you look at a youth like that in the eye, and you know how to read his soul—you’ll understand that his soul is still wandering in the past. He remembers yesterday and yearns for tomorrow. The present is superfluous and its only purpose is to bridge [the gap] between the life that once was and that which will be. The feeling that everything is provisional is felt at every step. There is no stability—either material or spiritual. Yesterday they were in hell on earth, and tomorrow they will be in paradise on earth—and between one and the other there is a void and idleness.155

The refugees who were settled by the US Army in many camps in and around the city, together with the representatives of Jewish relief organizations who came in the refugees’ wake and established offices in the city, made it temporarily into a large Jewish center on the liberated soil of Germany. For example, the JDC set up an office in Munich. Thus it was not surprising that Scholem, who was traveling around Germany in the guise of an employee of the JDC, included Munich in his plans. His visit to the city is also not surprising from the personal angle. He knew Munich very well from his days as a student there, in 1919–22. He had written his doctoral dissertation on The Book Bahir at the University of Munich, based on a manuscript of that mystical work in the Hebrew manuscript collection of the Bavarian National Library. It was also in Munich that he prepared himself for emigration to the Land of Israel.

When he arrived in Munich in 1946, Scholem began searching for collections of Jewish books, holding meetings with central figures who could help him. With the assistance of Leo Schwarz, the director of the JDC for refugee affairs in the city, he found a place to sleep in the JDC offices. Schwarz made a very good impression on Scholem and displayed a willingness to help him, unlike the people in the JDC office in Frankfurt. The day after Scholem’s arrival, he met the head of the renewed Jewish community of Munich, Julius Spanier, who told him about the dismal situation with respect to locating Jewish books: many of them had been burned in the Allied bombings; the community library had disappeared without a trace; and the community archive had been moved somewhere, along with other general archives, and all of them had been burned there as early
as 1943.\textsuperscript{156} A few valuable items had been buried in the Jewish cemetery, but the work of searching for them and removing them had not yet been done. According to Scholem, Spanier understood the need to transfer the items that still might be found from Munich to Jerusalem, because of the present situation of the community: “Here there are three couples, both of whose members are Jewish, and all the rest are intermarriages, of which one spouse declared his Judaism and desire to belong to the community.”\textsuperscript{157}

Scholem recorded in his diary his impressions of the conversations he had with various people in Munich: “There are some Nazis who still know where the things disappeared to, especially university people, like the former professor of Semitic languages . . . . The amount of information possessed by all these people is minuscule. But I got information . . . that I hadn’t thought of before, that [Hans Ludwig] Held was still alive, and he was again the head of the municipal library.”\textsuperscript{158}

Several times in his trip, Scholem had opportunities to find out about the fate of Jewish books from Nazi sources. On several occasions he heard that there were still collections of Jewish books in hiding places known only to former Nazi officials. These officials were willing to share the information in their possession, but they insisted on one condition, which Scholem mentioned in the report that he wrote after his return home: “The question is how much it is permitted to be involved with people like that in order to obtain information, which of course is connected to the demand made by these gentlemen to be given a certificate of merit as philo-Semites (\textit{ohavei Israel}).”\textsuperscript{159} Scholem decided to refrain from depending on such sources of information, and he did not meet with those officials, but he indicated that there was reason to believe the reports, because many Nazis had plundered valuable Jewish books on their own account. “Thus it is possible,” Scholem wrote, “that in time things of this kind will be put up for sale in Germany.”\textsuperscript{160}

One of the pieces of information that Scholem received in his conversations with people of Munich encouraged him greatly: Held was in Munich and the director of the city’s municipal library. Held—whom Allony described a few years later as “short and broad of build,” whose “appearance is impressive and leaves an impression”\textsuperscript{161}—had been the director of that library from 1921 until the Nazis came to power in 1933, when he was dismissed because he was a socialist. He was restored to this position in 1945. Scholem was on friendly terms with Held, and the two had exchanged a number of letters before the war and apparently met when Scholem visited Munich in 1927. Held was interested in Judaism and had even published a number of works on Jewish topics, including an adaptation of a collection of Talmudic tales with an introduction and a book on the Golem.\textsuperscript{162}
Scholem met with Held after an unsuccessful meeting with the director of the Bavarian National Library, who had shown little willingness to help. However, Scholem did discover in this meeting that the important and famous collection of Hebrew and Jewish books and manuscripts owned by the library had been saved in its entirety and was awaiting rearrangement. Scholem was very familiar with this collection from his student days in Munich, and he had even published corrections to the important catalogue of manuscripts in the library written by Moritz Steinschneider.163

In his meeting with Held, Scholem presented the idea that the Germans should compensate the Jewish people, which he had been discussed with Eppelsheimer in Frankfurt. According to this idea, the city of Munich would transfer the important Hebrew manuscripts in its collection—chiefly the famous Codex 95, the only complete manuscript of the Talmud, which Steinschneider had estimated to be the most valuable in the collection164—to the Hebrew University. Scholem reported to the Hebrew University on his conversation with Held: “I said that it might be an important moral gesture if German authorities, of their own free will, would turn over certain of this objects, and especially the Munich manuscript of the Talmud, to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem as a symbolic act towards the Jewish people and as a first step toward bridging the awful abyss that has been created between the two peoples.”165

Although Scholem’s approach in the two cities had been similar, there was an important difference between the collections in Munich and Frankfurt: whereas the manuscripts in the municipal library of Frankfurt had been contributed or purchased with funds provided by the local Jewish community, the books in Munich were legally owned in full by the Bavarian state, and there was no judicial basis for the claim that they belong to the Jewish people. Any negotiations about transferring part of this collection could proceed only on an ethical and political basis, rather than a legal one. Hence in his conversation with Held, Scholem raised Eppelsheimer’s idea that such a step could be taken only at the initiative of German agents, without any Jewish intervention. “The Germans who are prepared to deal with this matter are decidedly anti-Nazi and of a pure ethical character,” he declared in the report written after his return, referring to Eppelsheimer and Held. “They are interested in seeing the matter proposed by Germans and not as a claim of the Jews.”166 Held expressed one concern: if such a gesture were to encounter refusal on the Jewish side, this would cause great distress among the Germans, and Scholem wrote his thoughts on this point to the university as well: “I, personally, expressed the opinion that the university would give a decent and encouraging answer to such a symbolic act of restitution of the important Jewish treasures which are legally in the hands of the Bavarian
government. I said that the university might recall the existence of two Germanys and, at any rate, would take an attitude in line with general humanistic and liberal principles which it has always stood for.”

Scholem’s remarks on building a bridge over the abyss that had opened between the two nations and on recognition that there were two Germanys came much before their time for both sides, and that could be why the plan to convey the precious material to the Hebrew University was never carried out. The Hebrew-language collection, including Codex 95, remains in the possession of the Bavarian National Library.

Scholem’s efforts to obtain other important manuscripts and books from collections in German libraries for the National Library in Jerusalem had a practical purpose internal to Jewry: to fill in the huge gap created by the disappearance of a large number of the manuscripts that had been owned by Jews. The fate of the lost manuscripts was unknown, and the likelihood that they had been burned in Allied air raids was as great as the possibility that they might be found in the future. In his letter to the Hebrew University, Scholem called this uncertainty “one of the worst aspects of my experience here.” Indeed, his efforts in Munich to find information about book collections produced no results: “Everyone gives me different addresses, which are of little use, and sends me from one person to another who knows even less!” he wrote in his diary on July 26. This situation and his oppressive mental and physical fatigue reinforced his sense that there was a fundamental error in his mission—specifically, the estimated time needed for seeking and locating the books. This error, he felt, placed him in an impossible situation. On Sunday, July 28, on the eve of his departure from Munich after visiting the DP camp in Landsberg, he wrote in his diary: “A huge storm toward evening. I feel so bad and unfit for the mission here! My insomnia comes of course with this constant feeling and incessant reflections. Every little thing requires a long time, and I cannot do anything because of lack of unlimited time!”

Frankfurt and Berlin (July 30–August 11)

Scholem left Munich with a bitter sense of disappointment. “A bad feeling upon leaving here,” he wrote in his diary on July 29, on the eve of his departure on the night train to Frankfurt. “I didn’t succeed in finding even a few things, and who can find them?” On a one-day visit to Frankfurt, on the way to Berlin, he managed to leave his belongings and civilian clothes in the Jewish Agency offices, for fear that they would be stolen in Berlin. This short stay in Frankfurt also allowed him to form a gloomy picture of the disorganization and disunity in the ranks of the various Jewish agencies active in Europe: “The tension and
mutual bitterness among all the camps is very great. From every side I hear people complaining about each other, some seem justified, and others don’t even have the appearance of justification. We have not formed a united front at all!”

On August 1, at nine o’clock in the morning, Scholem’s train from Frankfurt reached Berlin. His first quarters in Berlin were in the JDC building, but because it was outside of the city, he looked for somewhere else to stay. He spent the first days in meetings with various people regarding his mission, but the day after his arrival he also visited the DP camps in Schlachtensee and Tempelhof “to see the people coming from Russia.” Immediately afterward he went to see the center of Berlin and the scenes of his childhood for the first time after the war: “I saw our apartments in Neue Grünstrasse, [and] Friedrichsgracht Everything is destroyed!! The inner part of the city—dead. We went as far as the synagogue on Oranienburgstrasse. In the evening, greeting the Sabbath with Rabbi Rosenberg and with Hermann Landau from Fürth. A strange impression—Shabbat Chazon in Berlin after 14 years!”

The situation in Berlin while Scholem was there suited the season according to the Jewish calendar—the season of days of mourning for the destruction of
the Temple and the sorrow and distress that followed it. It was not by chance that Scholem emphasized the fact that the Sabbath of August 3 was Shabbat Chazon. The reading from the Prophets on this Sabbath, the last one before the fast day of the Ninth of Ab, is the following verses from the book of Isaiah: “Your country is desolate; your cities are burned with fire; your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by floods. And the daughter of Zion is left as a booth in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city. Except the LOR D of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, we should have been like unto Gomorrah” (Isaiah 1:7–9).

On that Sabbath Scholem moved into a “small and dreadful” room in a hotel in the Dahlem neighborhood of southern Berlin. After another walk around the center of the city, he met with Ernst Grumach, a Jewish scholar of classics who had worked as a forced laborer in Berlin from 1941 in the library of stolen books that had been established by the rSHA. Scholem received important information from Grumach about Jewish libraries that had been transferred to this Nazi library in Berlin, including the fact that Grumach had sent most of the books that passed through his hands to the Niemes castle in Czechoslovakia. When this meeting ended, late at night, the JDC car that was supposed to pick Scholem up and take him to his hotel did not appear, and he was forced to walk for an hour and a half until he found the hotel. His attitude toward the JDC people became increasingly negative and bitter. The next day he wrote in his notes that, among the JDC people in Berlin, “a bad attitude toward me is brewing, and I feel it through the mask of a skewed smile. I don’t know what caused it, but I see and feel it.”

The next day, after a sleepless night, Scholem resolved to end his journey and return home. He decided to give up on the effort to enter the English occupation zone and to cancel the trip to the United States that he had planned to take with Fania. The fact that in Berlin he had failed to find any hint of the location of important book collections, especially because of the limited time and the restrictions that had been imposed on his movements, as well as his generally gloomy mood, led him to feel that he had exhausted all the available possibilities and was himself close to exhaustion. Scholem spent the eve of the Nine of Ab at prayer with refugees in the Schlachtensee camp. Scholem recorded his impressions of the evening in his diary on August 5: “[Rabbi Mayer] Abramowitz read the dirges, and it was very impressive—nevertheless I felt the public’s lack of response to this text. As though they had been turned to stone.” Scholem had known Abramowitz since the time he had studied with Saul Lieberman at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and with Scholem when he was there in 1938. Now Abramowitz was serving as a US Army chaplain. While
serving in various places in Germany, Abramowitz had visited many DP camps and provided the residents with religious services and material assistance (food and other basic necessities), and he helped some of them in their efforts to reach Palestine. He was stationed in Berlin in 1946 and took part in organizing the flight of Jews from Eastern Europe and tended to the residents of the Schlachtensee and Tempelhof camps. Perhaps Abramowitz’s most important achievement in Berlin was the establishment of a large Jewish and Hebrew school for the Jewish children in the region, especially in the two camps. At the same time he created a teacher training program, in which a group of educated people from the camps took part. The teachers met every Thursday evening to learn Hebrew and educational methods and to discuss problems in the camps, as well as to have a social gathering at which they sang, danced, and ate. On one Thursday evening, August 8, about a hundred teachers from the camp gathered at Abramowitz’s house. He had just returned from a visit to Palestine, and he told the group—with a pinch of pathos and exaggeration—about the situation in the Yishuv in general and about the attitude toward them, the Jewish refugees waiting in Germany for the opportunity to immigrate to the Land of Israel. Two weeks later, the Yiddish magazine of the Schlachtensee and Tempelhof camps described the event: “He spoke . . . in warm words, telling us how well the Yishuv was organized. How every Jew knows what he is fighting for. From large to small, they do not pay heed to the difficulties, they do not dwell on their worries, everyone is occupied with a single task: to make preparations for thousands of new immigrants. Without commotion, without noise. Life proceeds in its course. Not a minute is lost, not a second of Jewish work for our cause.”

The audience eagerly drank in the charismatic rabbi’s utopian descriptions of the Land of Israel, which were meant to inspire confidence and faith in the teachers, and in which they could also find consolation for their present situation and a goal to strive for. The magazine article described the effect of Abramowitz’s words on his listeners: “The rabbi spoke, and his words were full of enthusiasm, soothing our miserable souls, like the best balm of all. The Yishuv is full of hope. Our victory—Abramowitz cries out—is assured. No power can stop the sweeping current.”

When Abramowitz was finished speaking, everyone ate together in a festive mood and spoke about their work, their purpose, and their future in the spirit of the rabbi. After the meal Scholem, the professor from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, who had been present throughout the evening, rose and also spoke to the teachers in Hebrew for about half an hour. He praised them and tried to inspire them with hope and courage to pursue the goal they had chosen for themselves. The magazine article noted that “it was a special pleasure for us to hear
the words of Professor Scholem, who, in Hebrew full of life, expressed his joy at seeing before him such a group of teachers and educators, who were standing on guard and doing everything to be the educators of a generation as firm as rock, to teach youth who must be filled with the spirit of our heroes. A generation that will know its own value and be prepared for action.”

Scholem’s meetings with the refugees and the spirit of his talks in Frankfurt and Berlin, as presented here, indicate the way he understood his mission—as related to the Yishuv in general and not just to the Hebrew University and the National Library. His purpose was not only to bring ownerless books to Palestine to make it a spiritual center of Jewish culture, but also to encourage the stateless refugees and arouse their Zionist tendencies, which would lead them to immigrate and contribute to making Palestine a Jewish center.

In addition to his meetings with the Jewish residents of postwar Berlin, and despite the signs of fatigue and psychological distress that are evident in his diary, he also spent time searching for books, but without great success. At a meeting with Reuben Peiss, the head of the delegation of the US Library of Congress in Europe, Scholem spoke about Gestapo files and Nazi literature, which he wanted to transfer to Jerusalem, and thereby he aroused Peiss’s interest in them, probably making it impossible to transfer them to Palestine. “The man is not friendly,” he wrote about Peiss in his journal, “and he acts according to ‘the letter of the law’!” Another meeting with an American officer convinced Scholem of the uselessness of that avenue of activity: “Of course there would be no benefit to working with them unless I had a great deal of time,” he wrote, “then they could arrange something for me, through official channels.”

Scholem had very little success in finding important books in Berlin. His investigations showed that all the Jewish community libraries had been transferred to the Gestapo. Books on general subjects had been sent to German public libraries, and locating them was very complicated. As for private libraries, Scholem wrote in his report: “Only in very few cases did a few Jews, who lived in mixed marriages and were saved by a miracle from the destruction of their apartments by bombing, succeed in keeping their private libraries, and I saw no more than two like that with my own eyes, and their owners were very pleased.”

The Jewish community of Berlin had been left with almost none of the libraries and archives that had been in its possession, but in this area Scholem did achieve something important: an agreement in principle with the head of the community to transfer to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem the books that it had owned and that, as Scholem surmised, had been sent to the Niemes castle in Czechoslovakia.

On August 9, he went to the head of the Jewish community to receive an official letter to this effect. On his way to this meeting, Scholem was involved in a
traffic accident: in the center of the city, at the corner of Unter den Linden and Friedrichstrasse, a motorcycle ran into the military jeep he was riding in, and he got a deep cut on his right arm. The initial treatment and x-rays at the community hospital showed that, fortunately, he had not broken any ribs. “The pain is very great, as is my weakness,” he wrote in his diary the next day, “but I hope that in a week the wound will heal, if it is not infected. A souvenir of Berlin. My coat and my uniform were torn, and I don’t have another!” The wound made things difficult for Scholem, both physically and psychologically, and intensified his feelings of despair at not accomplishing much in Berlin. As he wrote in his diary: “I haven’t yet sent telegrams about canceling my trip to the US. There is a cruel inner laziness that’s worse than anything, because of the feverish activity that brings no benefit.”

Frankfurt, Heidelberg, Paris, and Jerusalem (August 12–26)

On the morning of August 12, Scholem returned to Frankfurt and began to prepare for his return to Jerusalem and the cancellation of his planned trip to the United States. Though he felt that his physical condition was improving slightly and that his wound was healing, his psychological condition continued to decline. “I have no ‘holy spirit,’” he wrote in his diary, “something has been broken in me, and I am very depressed, something of the creativity and strength I had [is gone]. This mission has eaten me up, and it did not bring with it the inner salvation (hapdut hapnimit) I had thought of.” His hopes for recovery from his wound also proved illusory, and it began to worry him again: “This morning my wound opened, which had not been bandaged tightly enough by the aide yesterday. A big mess.”

At that time Scholem held his last meetings with Pinson and Eppelsheimer, and he also worked for a few hours with Bencowitz in the OAD. A two-day visit to Heidelberg on August 17–18 did not improve his gloomy mood. At that time he stayed with Schneider and met again with friends. “Sad days in Frankfurt,” he wrote in his diary, “a dreadful feeling of isolation.” On August 20 he returned to Paris, and on August 26—almost four and a half months after the beginning of his journey from Paris—Scholem returned to his home at 28 Abarbanel Street in the Rehavia neighborhood of Jerusalem.

A Famous Thief: The Manuscript Operation in the Offenbach Archival Depot

A few months after Scholem flew from Paris to Tel Aviv via Cairo, a special shipment traveled across the Mediterranean on its way to Palestine. In the hold of a ship that had sailed from England, along with the private library of Chaim
Weizmann, were five crates containing a large number of rare and valuable Hebrew manuscripts and books, making their way to the National and University Library in Jerusalem. The story of how which this rare collection from the OAD ended up in the hold of a ship sailing eastward from Europe is directly connected to Scholem and to Herbert Friedman, a young rabbi who was serving as a chaplain in Frankfurt and Offenbach.195

While working in the OAD, Scholem had sorted out the rarest and most precious Hebrew books and manuscripts that he found, putting them in five crates that were arranged according to the value of their contents.196 His fear that these rare treasures might be stolen and sold on the black market led him to present an official request to the American authorities to take the crates with him to Palestine. This request met with refusal, behind which apparently lay an expression of interest in the books on the part of Jewish organizations in the United States. In particular, Louis Finkelstein, head of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, wanted some of this precious material for his library and had begun to try to obtain it.197 In despair, Scholem spoke to Friedman, who sympathized with his situation and promised to help solve the problem. On New Year’s Eve, more than three months after Scholem had left Europe, Friedman stole the crates of books from the warehouse, disguising them as a shipment of books borrowed by the JDC for the DP camps. Bencowitz turned a blind eye. Friedman signed the lending form in the name of Pinson, who by that time had already been in the United States for a few months.

Around midnight, when the warehouse workers were drunk as a result of celebrating the new year, Friedman loaded the crates into a windowless ambulance belonging to the JDC and then transferred them to a military truck that was parked nearby. He drove from Offenbach to the office of the Jewish Agency in Paris, to send the crates on to Scholem in Palestine through it. The people at the Jewish Agency refused to accept the stolen crates or take part in the plot, but they provided Friedman with important information: Weizmann’s private library was being sent from England to Palestine on a ship that was then anchored in Antwerp. The ship was about to depart, and for Friedman this seemed to be the most secure and easy solution: “Hiding my five crates among his dozens would be the easiest way to smuggle the merchandise to Palestine and Scholem,” he wrote in his memoirs many years later.198 So he drove from Paris to Antwerp; scattered the crates intended for Scholem, which bore his name, among the crates of books from Weizmann’s library; sent a telegram announcing the shipment to Jerusalem; and returned to Offenbach, where he continued his regular life.

A few weeks later Friedman was interrogated by the military police, who showed him proof of his responsibility for the disappearance of the books.
Knowing that he would face a court-martial, Friedman divulged the details of the affair to Bernstein, the advisor on Jewish affairs to the US Army in Europe. Bernstein arranged for an immediate meeting between Friedman and General Lucius Clay, commander of the US forces in Germany, and Friedman told him the whole story. Years later, in an interview, Friedman remembered his answer to Clay’s question about what had motivated him to steal the books: “I said I didn’t want the stuff to get stolen and lost the second time. Those boxes wouldn’t be secure in that warehouse, somebody would rip them open, somebody would see the stuff, somebody would recognize it. An antiquarian would be approached, the stuff has value. And it was lost once. Its owners are gone. The Jewish people collectively is concentrating in Palestine. Palestine will be free one fine day. These should be in the National Jewish Library in Palestine, that’s the successor, inheritor of all that stuff. That’s why I did it.”

Friedman convinced Clay that he hadn’t intended to sell the books on the black market, and that his chief concern had been to keep the books from being lost. It might be that the evident conviction with which Friedman spoke had an effect on Clay. In any event, he canceled the court-martial that had been hanging over Friedman’s head, but he also ordered Friedman sent back to the United States immediately and discharged from the army. As for the crates, Clay ordered that they be returned to Europe immediately. At the end of the conversation, Friedman urged Clay not to move these valuable cultural treasures again, but to leave them in Palestine under the trusteeship of the Hebrew University.

Further developments in this affair over the following months are revealed in a series of telegrams from Jerusalem, Frankfurt, and Paris, which are in the archives of the Hebrew University. In mid-January the existence of the shipment was first reported to Senator, who tried to clarify the matter with Scholem—but the latter had known nothing about Friedman’s actions and had no information about the exact contents of the crates. His surprise on receiving the information is shown in his letter to Senator in early March. Scholem wrote about his efforts to clarify the exact contents of the shipment before it arrived in Palestine. He reported that he had sent a man associated with the university to the ship—which was apparently then docked in France on its way to Palestine—to find out more about the shipment: “The difficulty is that I have no notion of the identity of these mysterious things, just one or two conjectures, and I have to wait until our friend opens them for examination.” In the same letter he expressed apprehension about the likely consequences if it became known that he had been involved in stealing and shipping the books. In early 1947 a discussion had been held at the Hebrew University about sending a new delegation to Europe to organize the transfer of many books to Palestine. Without much enthusiasm, Scholem had
agreed to join the delegation, if no other appropriate person could be found. “But now,” he wrote Senator, “you must understand that if there is anything in it, and my name is known in high places, it should not even be considered that I can go there again, because they will reject me of course in the examination office. And this is of great concern, because I don’t know who will go [instead].”

Scholem’s apprehensions about the anger that the affair would provoke among the American authorities and the difficulties it would present for his continued efforts to rescue books were warranted, at least in the short term. For example, an official request by the JDC to the American authorities to remove additional books for the DP camps encountered many difficulties.

News that the crates had been stolen was spreading among the Jewish figures who had an interest of their own in the books, which required the American authorities to locate the stolen books to return them. At the end of March a telegram from Frankfurt reached Scholem, in which Friedman informed him that the books would apparently have to be sent back, and that he would have to confirm receipt of the crates and promise not to open them except on further instructions. Two days later another telegram arrived, this time from Bernstein, who corroborated Friedman’s message: the crates must be returned to Frankfurt immediately, and this should be done personally, at any price, by Charles Passman, the new director of the JDC in Europe, who was visiting Palestine at that time. The problem was that the crates had still not reached Palestine. Finally, on April 8, the crates were received by the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and, as promised, were left unopened. Scholem promptly sent a telegram with the news to Bernstein and received instructions from him to keep the sealed crates at the university for the time being, to inform Clay directly of their arrival, and to await further instructions. A month later instructions were received from the US consulate in Jerusalem to transfer the crates to it, so they could be flown back to Europe. On May 7, the crates were conveyed to the consulate, where they were opened and their contents were examined cursorily. The receipt given by the consulate to the Hebrew University after delivery of the crates stated: “Four cases which are apparently full, one case which is practically empty.” But a few days later, and without any clear evidence from the documents for the reasons for the change, the decision was reversed, and instructions were given to leave the books and manuscripts in Jerusalem and to appoint the Hebrew University as their trustee.

When the crates were examined, a brief list in English of their contents was made by a librarian from the National and University Library, in the presence of a representative of the American consulate. At the end of the list a short affidavit was appended, confirming delivery of the collection to the Hebrew University
on June 22, 1947, and the university’s acceptance of the consulate’s conditions: “We undertake to return any and all of them [the items in the collection] on first request from that office.” Thus in the summer of 1947, a collection of Jewish cultural treasures from Europe—treasures that had been plundered by the Nazis, collected by the American occupation authorities, placed in the OAD, sorted by Scholem, stolen by Friedman, and sent to Palestine—found its way to the National Library on Mount Scopus under the trusteeship of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. As mentioned above, Scholem’s and Friedman’s fear that the books in the OAD were liable to be stolen and sold illegally in Germany was not without foundation. Moreover, under the American military regime in Germany, stealing and bending the law by chaplains to fulfill Jewish interests was not a unique event. Abramowitz, Scholem’s friend and former student, encountered difficulties when he wanted to print textbooks for the school he had established. To accomplish this task, he stole paper from a military warehouse and used threats and bribery in the form of cigarettes and military coal to get the printing done in a shop in the French occupation zone in Berlin.

Thus Friedman’s action was not exceptional, and if he hadn’t been caught, the story would probably not have aroused any attention. Moreover, there are solid grounds for assuming that if he had not taken these valuable manuscripts illegally and sent them abroad secretly, most of them would have disappeared. At the same time, because of the significance of his operation in the international arena and the sensitivity of the subject for the various Jewish centers around the world, Friedman’s actions could not have remained a secret, and the story would inevitably have been publicized in the Jewish world as well as in the American military.

On December 9, 1947, almost a year after the theft of the books from the OAD and their illegal shipment to Palestine, an article about these events was published in Stars and Stripes, the American military newspaper. The story had reached the journalists from Clay. They performed a short investigation and published its results without mentioning the names of the men involved in the affair. The article reported the events in brief and inaccurately. Thus, for example, the journalists claimed that two American captains (one a chaplain) had committed the robbery, and that the crates were later and unexpectedly found in Jerusalem as a result of an investigation initiated by the US consul there. In any event, two central and important items of information about the affair appeared in the article: the estimate that 1,100 stolen items had been in the crates, and an appraisal of their value at between $3 and $5 million. The authors based this appraisal on a list of the items supposedly written by Scholem. Toward the end, the article criticized the US military regime in Germany for the way in which it had handled the matter, claiming that leaving the items in Palestine was contrary to “present
MG [military government] regulations which state that all looted materials must be returned to the country of origin.”214 A few months later the article reached Magnes, who immediately passed it on to Scholem, along with a short letter asking him to respond to it. The need for a proper response arose from fear that the article would arouse renewed interest in the books and the desire to come to a final decision regarding them, a decision that would imply their removal from the temporary trusteeship of the university.215

Less than a week later, Scholem sent a detailed reply to Magnes, which was mainly related to the article’s estimates of the number of the books and their value.216 Scholem denied that he had made a list of the items or estimated their value. In fact, he claimed that his criteria in sorting the books had been their value for a museum and the use to which they could be put for scholarship. He wrote that the monetary value of the items was not, in fact, high—at most about $10,000—though he knew very well that it was not really possible to estimate the market value of such unique items. Regarding the number of books that had been shipped, Scholem claimed that it had been greatly exaggerated. There were 350 items, not 1,100. Scholem attributed the exaggerated estimate to the way in which the books had been crated in Offenbach, where the average number of books per crate had been estimated to be 220—since the shipment had contained five crates, that explained the journalists’ estimate.217

Scholem’s claims were supported by the list of the contents made in the US consulate in preparation for their transfer to the university. That list contains 378 items and specifies which crate each had been in. The list is highly important for understanding Scholem’s mission in Europe and his feelings when he examined the eclectic and abundant stolen cultural treasures in the oad. The manuscripts and books in the crates symbolize the destruction of European Jewry and reflect the chaos that prevailed in Germany after the war. This small collection includes manuscripts from everywhere in Europe, mainly from Eastern Europe, which were listed with no internal order—exactly as they were crated by Scholem in Offenbach and found in the crates when they were opened in Jerusalem. The list is of writings from various places and periods, of different literary genres, and brought together by chance. At the same time, it is clear that chance alone did not produce the collection. Scholem’s sharp eye redeemed it from absolute randomness and gave it a certain direction, and he relied on a kind of inner canon according to which he determined what was most worthy of being saved for the future of the Jewish people. All this was done, of course, within the restrictions of the relatively small selection of material gathered in the oad.

Common to all the manuscripts in the crates—which varied widely in terms of place of origin, form, and content—was that they were written evidence of
the rich and varied Jewish cultural life that had been exterminated in Europe. In addition, the arrival of these writings in various ways and after many peregrinations in a single collection that was illegally transported to Jerusalem is strongly reminiscent of the fate of the patchwork society of refugees who also arrived on German soil at the end of the war, after many tribulations and reversals of fortune, and who sought to continue to the Land of Israel. Like Scholem’s encounter with the refugees in Germany and his first encounter with the writings in Offenbach, his renewed acquaintance with them almost a year later in Jerusalem was disappointing, as he reported to Baron: “I must say I am a little disappointed in the contents—from my own inspection I gather that there is nothing very ancient there, no medieval mss., most of it dating to the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries if not later.” The list indeed shows that the collection contained no truly ancient manuscripts or incunabula of great antiquarian value in 1947, but Scholem was also right in stating that it was impossible to assess the value of unique items, whose historical value as treasures of Jewish culture increases with the passage of time.

Magnes’s fear that, after publication of the article in Stars and Stripes, they would be required to return the valuable collection proved to be in vain. To this day, these rare manuscripts remain in the National Library of Israel in Givat Ram—having been brought from Mount Scopus after yet another adventure. In 1949, at the end of Israel’s war of independence, after the country reached a cease-fire agreement with Jordan, Mount Scopus remained an Israeli enclave surrounded by Jordanian territory. Within that enclave many books and manuscripts from the National Library were also cut off, including the collection from the OAD. Over time all the manuscripts were smuggled into Israel, a few at a time, by soldiers returning in the weekly supply convoy, and they were housed in the new National Library building in the campus of the Hebrew University in Givat Ram, which was inaugurated in the 1950s.

This episode also had a happy ending for Scholem. He did not become persona non grata as he had feared, either in the American occupation zone or among the Jews of the United States. Scholem played a central role in the continued work of the Diaspora Treasures Committee and went to Europe a number of times in search of additional collections of books. Moreover, he was appointed the vice chairman of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction Inc. (JCR), the New York–based successor of the CEJCR that served as an umbrella organization to deal with the restoration of Jewish property that had been plundered by the Nazis. A few years later he also helped establish the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts at the National Library and prepare Allony for his mission to Europe to locate and photograph Hebrew manuscripts.
However, not surprisingly, among Scholem’s private papers there is almost no mention of this affair or the publicity it received, except for one entry in his diary, where he described his renewed encounter with the European director of the JDC, Joseph Schwartz: “August 4 [1948]. Yesterday evening with Senator at a kind of reception for Dr. Joseph Schwartz from the JDC, where I met Mr. Goldstein, whom I had known in Paris. We spoke about books. Schwartz greeted me with the words: ‘Sie sind ja inzwischen a famous thief geworden [you have become in the meanwhile a famous thief].’”^221